



**MISSOURI
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES**

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October 1, 2003

Linda Lewis, Regional Administrator
Department of Health and Human Services
Federal Building
601 East 12th Street, Room 276
Kansas City, Missouri 64106

Dear Ms. Lewis:

I consider this submission of the Missouri Child and Family Services Review Statewide Assessment an opportunity for Missouri to strengthen our Child Welfare practice. We are looking forward to completing our on-site review and partnering with federal support staff, community stakeholders, field staff, supervisory, and management staff in developing a Program Improvement Plan.

The Child and Family Services Review is occurring at a time when downward trends in the economy are being felt throughout the nation. In fiscal year 2003, general revenue grew an austere 0.3% across all states. State approaches to coping with the sagging revenue picture varied:

- 37 states reduced fiscal year 2003 budgets.
- More than two-thirds of the nation's governors recommended fiscal year 2004 expenditures growth below five percent.
- 19 states proposed negative growth budgets.
- 29 states recommended broad-based net tax and fee increases.

In Missouri, the revenue picture was no brighter. During the last legislative session, debate centered on whether to increase revenues or reduce state spending. The revenue picture does not show any significant signs of improvement, so debate is expected to continue in the next legislative session.

Revenue shortfalls should not keep Missouri from improving how we do business. We need to be innovative and think outside of the traditional ways of managing government. We cannot continue to do work in the same way. I am committed to improving Missouri's child welfare system to ensure children's safety. The Department of Social Services and its new Children's Division have already begun to make changes.

The system has benefited from extensive review and analysis by the Commission on Children's Justice, convened by former Missouri Supreme Court Chief Justice Stephen Limbaugh, Judge Frank Conley and Richard Dunn, at Gov. Bob Holden's request; state Auditor Claire McCaskill; Sen. Bill Foster's Senate committee review; legislation sponsored by House Speaker Catherine Hanaway; and community partners across the state who hold us accountable and work with us for children and families. We are making improvements consistent with their recommendations:

- The call for a more open and accountable system has been heeded. A new philosophy, balancing the need for open communication with the safety, privacy and dignity of children, is being implemented. Missouri Supreme Court Chief Justice Ronnie White directed several counties to begin a pilot project holding open juvenile court hearings. Gov. Holden has established a Child Welfare Ombudsman Office for citizens who have concerns.
- Efforts to establish, renew, and improve communication and training between DSS and courts, juvenile officers, guardians ad litem, counselors, foster parents, parents and others are fostering better cooperation.
- Dramatic improvements are being made to the Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline. A new call management system will allow us to get to emergency calls quicker; allow more callers to avoid reaching busy signals; and accommodate call volume better. We are engaged in a process to ensure calls are classified consistently from operator to operator.
- We are increasing efforts to locate relatives, or others who support families, as placement resources for children who cannot remain safely with their own families. We know these placements can be less traumatic for children.
- We have explored other states' privatization efforts and are working toward an appropriate increase in privatizing services in Missouri. We weigh options carefully, determining the best use of state and private resources. We will work with providers to develop the right performance standards.
- In cooperation with the Department of Mental Health, we are developing a process to ensure that families need not make the heart-wrenching decisions to relinquish custody just so their children can access mental health services.
- We are working with law enforcement to improve background checks for foster parents and others who serve children in our custody.

These and other changes don't reflect what should happen someday, but rather reflect what is happening now. The changes are being made thoughtfully and judiciously, in concert with partners throughout the system. We are grateful for the cooperation of our dedicated staff, community partners, courts, parents, foster parents, juvenile officers and others.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Steve Roling". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized "S" at the beginning.

Steve Roling
Director